

Creating Connections: The Importance and Impact of Mentoring Students

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Abstract: Mentors are essential for student success. In these challenging and dynamic times in education and society, having mentors to provide support is of even greater importance. This paper shares information about mentoring initiatives for female undergraduate students pursuing a baccalaureate degree in construction management program at a four-year institution. Strategies for involving industry partners and alumni in mentoring initiatives, lessons learned, and plans for the future are highlighted.

Keywords: mentoring, mentoring initiatives, college-to-career transition, underrepresented student populations

Mentors provide helpful feedback and guidance, can help increase one's professional network, and can help overcome challenges at work. Mentors share their professional experience and knowledge and can provide a support system for students. In addition, mentors can help with career development and positively impact one's career path. Higher education institutions can help students connect with mentors to provide additional support through their academic studies and, ultimately, their professional careers. This paper provides an overview of mentoring initiatives for female undergraduate students pursuing a baccalaureate degree in construction management program at a four-year institution. Strategies for involving industry partners and alumni in mentoring initiatives, lessons learned, and plans for the future will also be discussed.

Background

Mentors are important for student and professional success. However, what is a mentor? No one standard definition for the term exists. Kram (1988) found that the word mentor could have different meanings for different people. Steinmann (2023) defines mentoring as an ongoing relationship between a mentor and a mentee. Haggard et al. (2010) reviewed the definitions of the term mentor in nearly 120 academic research articles and found nearly 40 definitions used over an almost 30-year time span. The American Psychological Association (2012) defines a mentor as someone with expertise who can help develop their mentee's career. The definition further describes that mentors have two functions: a career-related function to provide advice on professional performance and development and a psychosocial function to serve as a role model and support system. Additionally, mentors act as a resource to mentees and support them in building self-esteem and confidence (Stapley et al., 2022). A mentor could be a colleague, a friend, a coach, a supervisor, or an advisor.

Mentors help mentees gain new skills, be more effective in their careers, increase confidence, and help with overall career growth (Association for Talent Development, 2023). The benefits of mentoring relationships have been recognized, for mentors provide their knowledge and support to facilitate growth in mentees (Sosik & Gottschalk, 2000). Benefits for mentors include seeing others develop personally and professionally, expanding their viewpoints

and perspectives, developing new technical and soft skills, and gaining new ideas and insights (Association for Talent Development, 2023). Rubbi et al. (2023) found that open communication, personal attributes, and commitment played a critical role in mentors' and mentees' experiencing a positive mentor relationship.

Though the benefits of mentors are documented for all individuals, mentors are especially important for females working in male-dominated industries, such as the construction industry. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), one in ten construction workers is female. Elliot et al. (2011) describe that formal mentoring is essential for women to overcome gendered barriers. However, male-dominated careers, such as those in the construction industry, have a shortage of female mentors available in the United States, and women in these industries are less likely than men to obtain mentoring relationships (Ragins, 1989). Though mentoring is essential for women's career success, women struggle to find mentors to help their career development (Elliott et al., 2011). Mentoring initiatives for women in male-dominated industries are a strategy to help individuals feel supported in the workplace and help with their personal and professional development.

One strategy to help prepare students to find mentors and understand the importance of mentorship is establishing mentoring initiatives in an academic curriculum. Educational institutions prepare students to enter the workforce, and mentors have been shown to positively impact career development and success. Helping students find mentors and developing mentor relationships while still in college helps them to develop an additional support network before entering the professional workplace. Having established relationships with mentors will hopefully prepare students for success in their professional careers.

Methodology

This paper discusses the mentoring initiatives developed by an undergraduate construction management program. The author of this paper assisted in creating these initiatives and is the current coordinator of the program. A case study approach was utilized to explore these mentoring initiatives. According to Creswell (2014), case study research is an approach in which a researcher explores a case or several cases over time through data collecting. The researcher then reports a case description and case-based themes. In a case study, the research focuses on a bounded unit of analysis (Merriam, 1998). Patton (1980) describes that the unit of analysis also called the case, can be a person, a program, an organization, a group, an event, or a concept. In this paper, the unit of analysis was the mentoring initiatives developed by an undergraduate construction management program at a higher education institution.

Example of Mentoring Initiatives

The importance and value of mentors for females working in the construction industry are well documented (Elliott et al., 2011). The mentoring initiatives highlighted in this paper were established for female undergraduate students pursuing a baccalaureate degree in construction management at a four-year institution, Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana. The mentoring initiatives were developed to help female undergraduate students build a sense of community and establish connections with other females who will work in the construction industry. The mentoring initiatives include an alumni mentoring program and monthly social events. The alumni mentoring program was the first initiative established in 2013. This program connected current undergraduate female students with female alumnae of the construction

management program. This mentoring program was entirely voluntary, and current students in the program were not required to participate. The alumnae mentors were recruited by faculty in the construction management program. Students and mentors were matched based on similarities in personality, extracurricular activities, and career interests. Mentors and mentees were initially introduced via email by the construction management faculty coordinating the mentor program. The expectation for the mentors and the mentees was to have at least one phone conversation and two email conversations each month. The mentee was expected to initiate all of the communications. Though initial interest in the alumni mentoring program was strong among current students and alumni, tracking and maintaining the connections was challenging. Over time, without a dedicated effort to continue communication, many of these mentoring relationships lapsed.

Based on the initial interest and success of the alumni mentoring program, a new mentoring initiative was developed in 2015 to form mentoring connections between current students in the construction management program. This initiative included monthly social events, such as CM (Construction Management) Ladies' Events, for all female students enrolled in the construction management program. These events aimed to build a sense of community for current students in the program and help form mentor connections between underclassmen and upperclassmen female students. These programs included eating lunch or dinner, making crafts, playing board games, meeting with program alumnae, volunteering in the local community, participating in escape rooms, and painting pottery. These events were promoted primarily via email and word of mouth between the students, and all current female construction management students were invited to attend. The construction management industry advisory board provided funding to support these events. Though the cost for each event varied, the proposed budget was approximately \$10 per student for each event.

Initially, the two female construction management faculty selected the activities and dates for these events. Beginning in 2019, two female upperclassmen students who regularly attended these events were selected to coordinate these activities. Allowing upperclassmen students to coordinate these events increased student participation and gave the student leaders a sense of ownership. Each month, the two student leaders selected an activity and met with the faculty advisor to approve that idea. The faculty advisor purchased any required supplies for the event and developed and distributed all formal marketing materials. The student leaders helped with setting up and cleaning for the events and promoting the events to students. Based on record attendance, the most popular events were painting pottery at a local pottery studio, making cutting boards, and participating in a coffee and canvas painting event with a local artist. All of the monthly events have strong attendance, and informal feedback from students is consistently positive.

Involving Alumni and Industry Partners

One strategy to involve alumni and industry partners was to recruit them to serve as mentors. The alumni mentoring program directly engaged female alumnae. The faculty advisor, who has been a part of the construction management program since 2007, has consistently maintained communication with alumni. Those relationships have been instrumental in locating volunteers for the alumni mentoring program.

A second strategy is to involve alums and industry partners as guest speakers. Some of these individuals could not commit to serving as mentors but wanted to be engaged in these initiatives in some manner. Guest speakers participated in the monthly social events and shared experiences from their professional careers. Often, these guest speakers were alumna of the

program who had participated in the monthly CM Ladies Events and had positive memories of those experiences. These alumnae wanted to give back to their alma mater and their academic program by supporting part of the next generation of construction professionals.

Another strategy to engage alumni and industry partners was to seek financial support to bolster mentoring initiatives. Though these initiatives did not always have an associated cost, having financial resources can help strengthen activities by providing refreshments for a social activity or purchasing materials for a monthly event. The industry advisory board of the academic program in this article was the primary financial supporter of the described mentoring initiatives. For specific programming, such as the CM Ladies Events, other industry partners served as event sponsors and provided funding. That funding covered all event costs, and representatives from that organization had the opportunity to participate. That participation provided the opportunity for industry partners to share information about their companies, recruit potential internship and full-time candidates, increase their company presence on campus, and for those individuals to share stories from their professional experiences.

Lessons Learned

The primary lesson learned from the mentoring initiatives discussed in this study involved upperclassmen students in the planning and implementation. The average attendance at events significantly increased once these student leaders selected activities, coordinated dates, and helped with communication and marketing. Having student leaders provided a sense of ownership in these initiatives. Though the faculty advisor was actively involved in all decisions, having student-driven initiatives increased participation and made events more successful and effective.

An additional lesson learned was the importance of relationships with industry partners and alumni. Though these mentoring initiatives did not require large amounts of money, and some, such as the alumni mentoring program, require no funding, having industry partners and alumni willing to support these initiatives financially helped strengthen the programming. Financial support from this academic program's industry advisory board initially funded these mentoring initiatives. Support from alumni in the form of guest speakers for monthly events or serving as mentors also strengthened these initiatives. Current students benefit from seeing female graduates working as successful professionals in the industry.

The final lesson learned was the importance of flexibility monitoring and adjusting, which is critical when developing student initiative. The monthly social events evolved based on funding, the number of eligible and participating students, students' interests and ideas, and other factors. Adapting to accommodate the ever-changing student population was essential to ensure mentoring initiatives met student needs and helped prepare them for career and life success.

Plans for the Future

In the future, the monthly social events for female students will continue. These events have been well attended, and informal feedback from students who attend these events has been positive. Plans for the future include increasing student participation in these events, increasing alumni and industry support, and expanding the reach of the mentoring initiatives. One strategy to increase participation is to develop targeted outreach to engage female freshmen students in these events earlier in their academic careers. Engaging these students earlier will help them connect with other female students and establish potential mentoring relationships. A strategy to increase

alumni and industry support involves more female alumnae participating in these events as students. These alumnae are familiar with these mentoring initiatives and, as professionals, have new insights and perspectives to share about being a female working in the construction industry. This would also allow these alumnae to stay connected with the construction management program and could lead to additional future involvement or support. A strategy to expand the reach of these mentoring initiatives is to develop programming for other underrepresented student populations in this academic program. Creating and implementing new mentoring initiatives would help increase the sense of community and provide increased support for additional students.

Recommendations for Developing Mentoring Initiatives

One recommendation for developing mentoring initiatives is to identify key stakeholders and partners. In addition to serving as mentors, these partners can potentially provide funding, training and development programming, networking connections, and employment opportunities. These partnerships can aid in the short and long-term success of mentoring initiatives. Another recommendation for developing mentoring initiatives is to involve mentees in planning these programs. From helping brainstorm activities to identifying times and formats that work best to recruiting other individuals to be involved, the mentees in the initiatives highlighted in this paper have aided in developing and growing these programs.

A final recommendation for developing mentoring initiatives is to be prepared to adapt and adjust to address the needs of both mentees and mentors. From incorporating new programming formats to adapting to the global COVID-19 pandemic to including participants in the planning process, the initiatives in this paper have changed over time and will continue to evolve. There is no one-size-fits-all for mentoring initiatives. Individuals who coordinate mentoring initiatives must be prepared to monitor and adjust to ensure that these programs meet the needs of the mentees and the mentors.

Conclusion

Mentors are important for student success. The examples of mentoring initiatives shared in this article are strategies an academic program can create to help students find mentors, build a sense of community, and increase personal and professional support levels. Mentoring initiatives are one strategy higher education institutions can utilize to help students be successful during their academic careers and ultimately help them to thrive in their professional careers.

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